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**THE ALTERNATE ENDING:
A WARRIOR'S DEATH IN FACT, FICTION, AND FILM**

by

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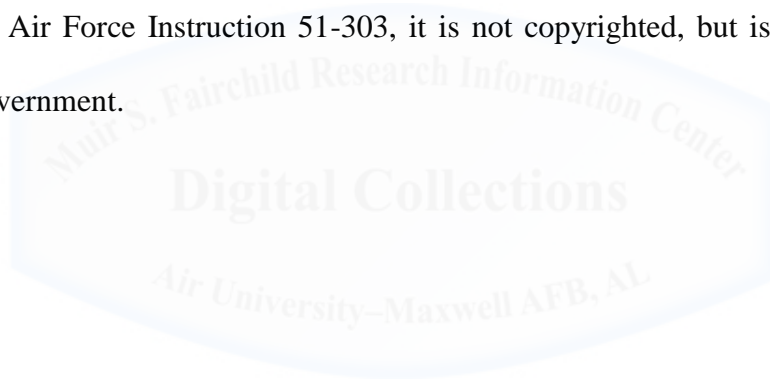
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Abstract

To give one's life in service to country conjures images of young soldiers willingly sacrificing their lives on the battlefield, perhaps even the single seat pilot who faces overwhelming odds in one final, heroic act. The warrior's death is self-sacrificing and establishes the difference between victory and defeat, good or evil, or in the most dramatic case, survival versus the death of mankind. These are the images of Hollywood films and though the audience wants the hero to win and to live, a warrior's sacrificial death for the greater good is the only alternative narrative the audience willingly accepts. This heroic death becomes the standard from which all modern warrior deaths are measured. In reality, deaths that match this image are extremely rare, and are recognized with a country's highest honors. A rank ordering of death then follows, through death benefits, medals, and honors, all of which support the notion that the details of the warrior's death truly matter. This rank ordering exists, yet a conflicting message also exists, which communicates that all modern warriors who die while serving are heroes, no matter the actual circumstances of their death. When a warrior's death does not measure up to the ideal death on the Hollywood screen, but nonetheless is deemed heroic, a disconnect emerges. A means to overcoming the inconsistency between fact and film is found through fictional literature, using Joseph Campbell's monomyth. In a novel, the hero's death means little without the journey, and so in fictional literature, the emphasis is on the life of the hero, while placing the death in proper context. Not only is the reader able to see that the hero's individual journey is fulfilled before death, but also the God's-eye view of the impact of that person's life and death on others. Only then does a greater picture emerge of the collective journey that humanity faces together, including death as a part of life. Jack Hunter's *The Ace*, and James Salter's *The Hunters* and *Cassada* are referenced in this analysis of the hero's death.

Contents

Disclaimer	ii
Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
The Hero's Journey	2
The Warrior's Death in Film	4
The Warrior's Death in Fact	5
The Warrior's Death in Fiction	7
The Focus on Death	9
Focus on the Journey	10
The Bigger Picture	13
Conclusion	17



Introduction

To give one's life in service to country conjures images of young soldiers willingly sacrificing their own lives on the battlefield, perhaps even the single seat pilot who faces overwhelming odds in one final, heroic act.¹ The warrior's death is self-sacrificing and establishes the difference between victory and defeat, good or evil, or in the most dramatic case, survival versus the death of mankind. These are the images of Hollywood films and though the audience wants the hero to win and to live, a warrior's sacrificial death for the greater good is the only alternative narrative the audience willingly accepts. This heroic death becomes the standard from which all modern warrior deaths are measured. In reality, deaths that match this image are extremely rare, and are recognized with a country's highest honors. A rank ordering of death then follows—both subconsciously and consciously—through death benefits, medals, and honors, all of which support the notion that the details of the warrior's death truly matter. This rank ordering exists, yet a conflicting message also exists, which communicates that all modern warriors who die while serving are heroes, no matter the actual circumstances of their death. When a warrior's death does not measure up to the ideal death on the Hollywood screen, but nonetheless is deemed heroic, a disconnect emerges. A means to overcoming the inconsistency between fact and film is found through fictional literature, using Joseph Campbell's monomyth. In a novel, the hero's death means little without the journey, and so in fictional literature, the emphasis is on the life of the hero, while placing the death in proper context. Not only is the reader able to see that the hero's individual journey is fulfilled before death, but also the God's-eye view of the impact of that person's life and death on others. Only then does a greater picture emerge of the collective journey that humanity faces together, including death as a part of life.

The Hero's Journey

Joseph Campbell's theoretic monomyth provides a roadmap for the hero's journey repeated in myths, films, and fictional literature. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell revealed a pattern of the hero's journey, broken down into seventeen steps.² Christopher Vogler then adapted the monomyth into a company memo and eventually into the book, *The Writer's Journey: Mythical Structure for Writers*, condensing the hero's journey into twelve steps.³ Once studied, the hero's journey, in totality or in part, is easily recognized on the screen and throughout fictional literature.

Campbell's hero receives *The Call to Adventure*, which takes place in a situation beyond everyday life, and is often answered with the hero's *Refusal of the Call*. After the hero commits to the adventure, a *Supernatural Aid* appears to help him in his journey and with this, the hero finds "the benign, protecting power of destiny."⁴ The hero then experiences the next step of *Crossing the First Threshold*, beyond which "is darkness, the unknown, and danger"⁵ and is "swallowed into the unknown" into the *Belly of the Whale*. Here, the hero must die to his old life and begin his transformation.⁶ The hero then must travel the *Road of Trials* where "dragons have now to be slain and surprising barriers passed—again, again, and again."⁷ The hero's *Meeting with the Goddess* "is the final test of the talent of the hero to win the boon of love, which is life itself enjoyed as the encasement of eternity."⁸ The hero must overcome one or many of life's temptations with the step entitled *Woman as Temptress*, though there may be no women involved in the temptation.⁹ When the hero surpasses this temptation, the *Atonement with the Father* follows. In this step, Campbell explains, "the problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of

the Being.” Further, “the hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source.” In that moment “he beholds the face of the father, understands – and the two are atoned.”¹⁰ The *Apotheosis* step is that moment in which the hero is reborn and relishes in his new found knowledge “of the great paradox by which the walls of the pairs of opposites is shattered and the candidate admitted to the vision of God.”¹¹

All previous steps of the journey prepare the hero for *The Ultimate Boon*, or the final test in his journey.¹² What the hero earns may be a physical object or a spiritual enlightenment. Once the hero has conquered his final test, he may be reluctant to share the boon with his previous world and exhibits *The Refusal of the Return*.¹³ The hero may return to his world alone through *The Magic Flight* or through external help in a *Rescue from Without*.¹⁴ Though the avenue may be different, in order to complete his full journey he must take the next step: *The Crossing of the Return Threshold*. It is at this time that the hero understands that while the two worlds seem distinct from one another, they are actually one world.¹⁵ When he becomes a *Master of the Two Worlds*, the hero can “speak only one point at a time, but that does not invalidate the insights of the rest.”¹⁶ Only with this full knowledge of the complete world does the hero have the *Freedom to Live*. The full knowledge of the world, including its darker side is impossible to handle for some, and so those individuals may create their own coping mechanisms. The hero, however, embraces both worlds and the full picture, and gives himself to that greater will so that he may truly live.¹⁷

Understanding that all elements of the monomyth would be difficult to translate to screen, Vogler translated Campbell’s 17 steps into 12 for the modern screenwriter. His steps include: the *Ordinary World*, the *Call to Adventure*, *Refusal of the Call*, *Meeting with the Mentor*, *Crossing the Threshold*, *Test*, *Allies*, and *Enemies*, *Approach* (in preparation for), *the Ordeal*, *the Reward*,

the Road Back, the Resurrection (or the final testing at the threshold), and the *Return with the Elixir*.¹⁸ Ideally, the hero will complete all the steps and return to his original life with an elixir, used for the greater good. If the warrior is the hero on the screen, the resurrection step is the last moment of the battle, where he must conquer his enemies in order to return to the world of peace, or must sacrifice his life in an act that restores the ordinary world. Despite the audience cheering for the hero, the warrior's sacrificial-death ending is accepted.

The Warrior's Death in Film

Specific to the pilot's death on the big screen, the sacrifice often includes the crash of both the pilot and the aircraft. Watching the destruction of a multi-million dollar machine makes for spectacular special effects. Randy Quaid's character, Russell Casse, in *Independence Day*, flies into the enemy spacecraft when his missile will not launch, sacrificing himself to save the planet.¹⁹ Even taken out of the context of the movie, a three-minute clip of this scene clearly shows the value of his heroic death. Even if an aircraft is not involved, there must be a magnificent explosion for effect, as is the case of Bruce Willis' character, Harry Stamper, in *Armageddon*.²⁰ Stamper detonates a nuclear weapon on the asteroid that is on a collision course with earth and makes a conscious sacrifice, which makes the difference between life and death of mankind. Sacrificial death is a common theme in films involving the military warrior. It is a death the audience understands, even if they do not know the characters making the sacrifice. In *London has Fallen*, a Marine Helicopter performs a pre-rehearsed sacrificial maneuver to save the president.²¹ The maneuver is crisply executed following an unemotional radio response. The audience both expects and respects warriors who are ready to give their lives for others, but it needs to visually see and instantly understand the value of that death.

The audience experiences the warrior's journey repeatedly through film, and though it understands the fictional nature of movies, without real-life experiences, the warrior's journey on film becomes the audience's only exposure to the warrior's life and death. In films that include the warrior's sacrificial death, the death itself becomes the warrior's *raison d'être*, and the true value of his life. More than only for the sole purpose of entertainment, movies vicariously and importantly translate experience, whether audiences realize it or not.

The Warrior's Death in Fact

Armed with only the experience of a warrior's death on the big screen, there is a subconscious expectation of the ideal, sacrificial death. Even in times of war, documented heroism, worthy of attention in film, is rare. Medal of Honor recipients who died are remembered specifically for their heroic actions, as defined by their personal sacrifice to save others. Approximately 405,400 US military personnel were killed in World War II (WWII), but only 473 received the military's highest honor.²² Even during a time of total war, in direct contact with the enemy, Medal of Honor recipients made up only .1 percent of those killed in the line of duty. Today, in a time of small, limited wars, military member are more likely to die in training accidents than in combat, simply because more time is spent training for the fight. Recent conflicts have also not required the sheer number of warriors that a conflict with a near-peer opponent would require. While the warrior's death from the screen is the prominent image most have in their minds of the only acceptable death for current military warriors, the truth is that warriors die in a variety of circumstances, including on the battlefield, in training accidents during peacetime and wartime, on and off duty, and even when they take their own lives.

Military members unfortunately die in these different situations, and the circumstances matter in terms of death benefits, medals, and privileges awarded to family members following a death.

Medal of Honor recipients are entitled to a 10 percent raise in retirement and their children attend service academies without a nomination. Families of those killed in training accidents during combat are afforded gold star status, unlike the families of those killed in peacetime training accidents. Death, while on duty versus off duty means the difference between \$100,000 and approximately \$12,000.²³ This highlights the reality of rank ordering of death which places all the emphasis of a person's value as a warrior on the circumstances of his death. This can be problematic when the warrior dies in a way that does not equate to the Hollywood death the audience expects.

Though a rank ordering of death exists on one hand, on the other hand, any death of a service member is considered heroic, documented in funeral eulogies and mainstream media. To those who consider military members heroes, the message is easy to accept. If the service member died in truly heroic circumstances, the death is even easier to accept by the greater audience. This is not to say that those close to the hero grieve less, but instead that the hero narrative matches their perceived meaning of that death. When the warrior does not die on the battlefield, but instead, for example, in a training accident, the hero narrative may not be as easy for some to accept.

Lieutenant Cassada's funeral following his death in James Salter's *Cassada* highlights this disconnect between the heroic message and the actual circumstances of a death. The Chaplain notes "I think of him as he strove through darkness seeking to fulfill his mission, to land his airplane while heroically guiding another pilot, his leader, who would have been lost without him." And "What an example he affords. To give one's life in the service of your

country. To die a hero's death."²⁴ Captain Wickenden in the audience is disgusted and thinks, "He's pouring it on." The Chaplain continues, "That he sought to save another, there is the answer and the mark of his worthiness. He rose to the challenge. Is there greater praise?"²⁵ Captain Isbell thinks about the Chaplain's words, "striving through the darkness" and thinks "That much at least is true."²⁶ Following the funeral Major Dunning's wife, Mayann asks, "Didn't that sicken you a little today?" She follows, "That sermon. All that stuff. Doesn't anyone tell these chaplains what's really going on?" Cassada's death from their point of view was his own fault since he could not successfully land in the weather. As Dunning puts it "Cassada was the one that let us down." Cassada's death would likely be attributed to pilot error, yet the Chaplain calls him a hero. Either he is a hero or he is not, and without a clear answer through viewing his death in isolation, the audience cannot move on.

The Warrior's Death in Fiction

The Ace

The answer and the resolution of these conflicting messages lie in the details and entirety of the novel. If we isolate the warrior's death in literature, it often looks lonely, or perhaps even inconsequential, as is the case with a single seat pilot. John King's death in *The Ace*, by Jack Hunter, is ironic and less than heroic when isolated from the rest of the story.²⁷ Carpenter and King take Senator Slater on an orientation flight to bolster his publicity. Before takeoff, King explains to Senator Slater the difference between duck shooting, where the shooter is stationary, and aerial combat, where everything is moving. During this timely lesson, German pilots, likely attempting to assassinate the Senator for his fraudulent dealings with the Germans, attack them.

The Senator is uninjured, but King dies in the ground assault, despite having survived aircraft accidents and countless air battles with the enemy. Though King has shot down close to 30 enemy aircraft, it is the disingenuous Senator Slater who is remembered as the Ace, for his two kills from the ground with the aircraft machine gun.²⁸ King should have been remembered as the war hero with his incredible number of kills, but the details of his death do not match the hero narrative. King recognizes the unheroic circumstances of his death when he says to Carpenter, “Eighty gazillion dogfights, and the bastards nail me on the ground. Wouldn’t you know? I’m even a failure at getting killed.”²⁹ Carpenter is with his friend when he leaves the world; “King gave him that lopsided smile, closed his eyes, and died.” The circumstances of King’s death, isolated from the rest of the story are more tragic than heroic.³⁰

The Hunters

Cleve’s death in James Salter’s *The Hunters* is another example of a seemingly lonely, tragic death, particularly when isolated from the rest of the story. “For Cleve, the war had ended in those final minutes of solitude that he had always dreaded. If there had been a last cry, electrically distilled through air, it had gone unheard as he fell to the multitudes he feared.”³¹ Salter does not allow the reader to experience what Cleve does as he faces death. Cleve cannot even be confirmed dead since there are no witnesses to the crash. This scene of someone merely speculating about the hero’s final moments does not match Hollywood’s glorified warrior death.

Cassada

Salter’s *Cassada* is yet another example of an unglorified death. The reader does not hear from Cassada or know what is going on in his cockpit as he makes his approach in the weather,

without his leader. Air Traffic Control and Major Dunning are the only ones on the radio as Cassada goes below glideslope and disappears. Cassada never has a last word and vanishes from the cockpit before Major Dunning and Major Godchaux get to the crash scene. The corpsman had already taken him away. Cassada's death is lonely to the point that the reader never hears from or sees him during his last moments, or after. The Chaplain then attaches a heroic meaning to the crash, which his audience and then the reader must adjudicate in their own minds.

The Focus on Death

Instead of leaving the audience with only the experience of a glorified death, which places all emphasis of a person's life on the details of the death, fictional literature provides so much more. Viewed in isolation, the deaths in these works seem unnecessary, and mean little without the rest of the story. When pilots die young, a normal comment was that they were "robbed" of their lives. Some might call them heroes and others call their deaths a tragedy. If these were the deaths of older men, a funeral may be a celebration of life, versus a somber event. Some may even comment at the funeral of an older man that "he lived a full life." Most often, society equates a long life to a full life, which is not always the case. So the question remains, are the men in these stories heroes, despite the un-heroic circumstances of their deaths?

Focusing on the deaths confuses this question, and so it is fictional literature that bridges the gap between the ideal hero and reality. A good novel gives the reader the full story so that the measure of the man is not in his death, but in his life. Setting Campbell's monomyth alongside the warrior's life in these fictional accounts allows the reader to see his journey through a different lens. While the audience can use Vogler's simplified 12 steps to evaluate the hero's journey, Campbell's 17 steps provide a fuller picture of the hero's journey and transformation.

The steps that are missing in Vogler's practical guide are those that are difficult to show on the screen. They are *Meeting with the Goddess*, *Atonement with the Hero's Father*, *Apotheosis*, *Master of Two Worlds*, and *Freedom to live*.³² It is difficult to portray human enlightenment, knowledge beyond one's self, and acceptance of those realizations in a two-hour film. The physical elements of the hero's journey are easy to show in film and resonate with a broader audience. Fictional literature can include these intangible steps, and in doing so gives the reader a full picture of the hero's journey, which includes both the physical and spiritual journey.

Focus on the Journey

Considering King's, Cassada's, and Cleve's full journeys helps in understanding their deaths, the impact of their lives and death on others, and paints a picture of something bigger than themselves in which they are a part. John King's journey consists of several opposing worlds: the world of flight versus the rest of the world on the ground, combat versus training, and this life versus what lies beyond this life. King experiences *the Call to Adventure* and the *Refusal of the Call* when he enters the world, stillborn. During his life he encounters a long *Road of Trails* where he loses his family, friends, and all earthy possessions and enlists in the Army in World War I. During this road King experiences miniature journeys that can be evaluated individually, and as a part of the full journey.

For example, King experiences *the Call to Adventure* and the *Refusal of the Call* to the world of flight when Carpenter takes him to "meet the angles." This flight is a miniature journey of itself, where King is introduced to new world, must face his fears, and then returns forever changed.³³ His *Supernatural Aid* is Carpenter who shows him this new world as he *Crosses the Threshold* into the world of flight and remains in the *Belly of the Whale*, where he starts to

experience an initial transformation. He faces his fears in the air as a part of his *Road of Trials* and has a *Meeting with the Goddess* in a metaphoric sense when he is “as one with the angels.”³⁴ He *Crosses the Return Threshold* when he lands on earth and, as *Master of the Two Worlds*, he acknowledges that he will never be the same again.³⁵

King’s other significant journey within a journey is his call to combat. He hesitates in his first encounter with the enemy, which leaves his flight lead dead. This leads to an “explosion of rage—an absolute refusal to accept himself, endure himself, for one moment longer.”³⁶ King transforms into a fearless combat ace, armed with a philosophy of destroying the enemy’s ability to kill him or anyone else.³⁷ After a particularly harrowing dogfight, in which he believes his aircraft is damaged, King lands with an aircraft that conversely shows no signs of combat. In his next encounter with the enemy, he makes the German pilot land to relinquish his helmet and goggles. These constitute the *Ultimate Boon* of his journey that is tangible proof of the other world of combat.³⁸

In King’s life journey, Mary Lou Whiting represents both his *Meeting with the Goddess*, as he experiences love, and his *Woman as Temptress*. He could succumb to Whiting’s love, but resists because he understands he is fated for death, which will be the *Crossing of the Return Threshold*. Through his dreams, the reader sees his *Atonement with the Father* when he faces what is on the other side of life. When King and Carpenter have their last meaningful discussion, Carpenter affirms King’s eternal legacy, representing the *Apotheosis*. In this conversation, the reader watches King receive the *Ultimate Boon* of true friendship and love. For King, this conversation, coupled with his last sortie with Carpenter, mark the end of what he needed in this life. King’s mother had given him this truth: “you are homesick for the world you came from and love is the only vehicle that can return you there.” Through King’s death, the reader experiences

the moment of his *Crossing of the Return Threshold* where he sees “a real pretty light. A kind of music. Piano music”³⁹ King is ready to cross into that other world and goes peacefully.

The analysis of King’s journey puts his death in context. His personal journey was completed before his death, and he was ready to cross the final threshold. In this case, King’s entire life was the sacrifice, instead of his death. Elements of the hero’s journey shine through the lives of those that surround King as well. The reader catches glimpses of the monomyth in the lives of Carpenter, Slater, and Whiting. King works as their collective *Supernatural Aid*, and their lives are transformed for the better through his life. Most notably is Carpenter’s transformation from the embodiment of the stereotypical pilot to a more mature, honest version of himself. When the reader meets Carpenter, he is a womanizer who drinks too much and lacks the ability of, or desire for self-evaluation. Through their letters and conversations, Carpenter repeatedly affirms King for the positive changes in his life. Carpenter says to King, “You have a way of making me look at myself, which I’ve never before been able to do with any honesty.”⁴⁰ Later Carpenter notes the seriousness he felt “creeping into his attitudes” and “if he had to choose any one place where it had begun, he’d have to name John King.”⁴¹

Though Slater’s character is the embodiment of the evils of greed and corruption, there is hope for him as well, after King’s death. Seconds before enemy aircraft fly over, King instructs Slater how to use the Lewis Gun and essentially arms Slater for his heroic moment.⁴² When Slater’s assistant reminds him of the publicity and votes the event will earn him, Slater does not “give a good goddam.”⁴³ He is changed through his meeting with King.

King’s life changes other characters throughout his journey. Whiting become a fearless pilot and on her longtime quest for love, Whiting meets Carpenter, an encounter that is made possible by King’s death. King leaves his mark on many throughout the novel. Vance, the pianist

who criticizes King's playing receives meaningful advice about how to improve his skills. Mrs. Algernon Forsythe-Goodman, a "titan of the arts,"⁴⁴ notably changes through her encounter with King. He assuages the guilt she feels over her son's death and there are hints that she profits from his music after his death.

The Bigger Picture

When journeys intersect, and the audience can see the impact of one person's life on others, a picture emerges of a design that is bigger than one individual journey. Whiting and Carpenter have a fated meeting when she pulls him out of yet another wrecked aircraft, when he crashes on the way to deliver King's letters to her.⁴⁵ These two are destined for each other and their lives together would not have happened without King's life and death. Though he is famous for his music after his death, the reader can only hope that Forsythe-Goodman has used those profits to enable other young musicians in starting their professions.

King lives a full life in a short amount of time and the impact he has on others and the legacy he leaves behind, not to mention his performance as a combat pilot, make him a hero to those he touched during and after his life. This is what fictional literature does, which makes it unique from real life; it gives the reader a God's eye view of the bigger picture that is impossible to get from the perspective of only a few people in life.

The Ace gives the reader a glimpse of that bigger picture and the far-reaching effects of one person's life. Sometimes the journey is internal to the hero, rather than purely a physical quest. In *The Hunters*, Cleve's journey is a very personal, solo journey, reinforcing the lifestyle of a single-seat combat pilot. "He was moving in a current of destiny, quite alone, as alone as a man dying."⁴⁶ To Cleve, entering combat is his *Crossing of the Threshold*. "He had come a long

way to this place. From one horizon of the world, to the other he had come, across endless waters, feeling continually more mortal and insignificant as he went...[and] there was no returning. He had crossed to the war, and a great sense of excitement was on him”⁴⁷ The reader learns what Cleve thinks the object of his journey is when his *Temptress*, Eiko, asks him about his ambition. In a sense, he must reconcile his peacetime performance with his performance in combat. From his experiences in peacetime, he is considered a natural flyer with a “reputation based on achievement,” which should translate to effectively hunting MiGs in combat.⁴⁸ As other pilots shoot down enemy aircraft, he questions if there is something in him that is preventing him from truly engaging. Cleve tells Eiko that what he seeks is to be a hero as an ace and then die in one last heroic act. “And when you make your last appearance, before whatever audience you have, you want it to be your real performance, to say, somehow, remember me for this.”⁴⁹ What he wants out of life is to be immortalized, as the hero is on the Big Screen, complete with a sacrificial death.

When Cleve faces Casey Jones in air-to-air combat, he is finally able to test his peacetime accomplishments in battle. In a truly impressive bout, he shoots down a legend, justifying his performance and securing him that heroic standing he thinks he wants more than anything. The aerial performance is not his final test, however. When he learns of his wingman’s death and there is nothing to confirm his defeat of Casey Jones, Cleve gives Hunter the credit for the kill. “Billy Hunter would have his day as a hero, and in memory be never less of a man than he had been on his last flight. Cleve could give him that at least—a name of his own.”⁵⁰ It is in this moment that Cleve gives away his sought after hero’s death and receives the true *Boon* of understanding his destiny. “In all that had passed, he had never imagined anything faintly like it,

to have searched the whole heavens for his destiny and godliness, and in the end to have found them on earth.”⁵¹

Cleve understands the rank ordering of death in society and particularly in his fighter pilot niche. To Hunter’s name, he attaches a powerful heroic meaning, and he will live on as a legend. Hunter becomes Cleve’s personal hero because through his death, Cleve met his full destiny. He will not have his own heroic death, but while he understands that to everyone else the heroic death is important, to him it is dust compared to his moment of *Atonement*. Cleve surrenders to sleep and, “victorious at last, he feels as little desire to live as he had ever known.” Cleve completes his journey in this moment and so the reader understands that he cannot die a hero’s death.⁵² Instead Cleve likely dies alone in his aircraft and the reader understands that his death is part of his accepted destiny.

Cassada’s hero’s journey is more difficult to analyze than Cleve’s or King’s because Salter writes his story in the third person and the reader is not privy to Cassada’s internal dialogue. Captain Isbell’s journey as the hero with Cassada as his *Supernatural Aid* is more fitting for the monomyth analysis, yet to understand if Cassada is a hero, the reader must seek out elements of his journey. Cassada grew up without a father in Puerto Rico with a dream of becoming a fighter pilot overseas. He waves to farm boys from his jet and “he was at last all he had dreamed of.”⁵³ This life as a fighter pilot is a new world with its own customs, nuances, and idols. Though Cassada is where he wants to be, he still has a longing to be authentic, like the combat pilots in his squadron and “to make a name for himself, become known.”⁵⁴ This represents the *Ultimate Boon* Cassada wants to earn. Unlike Cleve in *The Hunters* and King in *The Ace*, Cassada is not recognized as a natural pilot. He is described as enthusiastic and without fear, but does not have the anointing of the pilot with the God-given ability of a natural, like his

squadron mate, Godchaux.⁵⁵ Cassada's time in the squadron is "striving through the darkness" as he longs for someone with any authority to have faith in him.

The ideal hero's death in this book would be that of Isbell, the proven pilot, willingly giving his life so that Cassada can fulfill his true purpose in life. This is not the case however and Salter attempts to come to terms through his writing with the fact that sometimes "the best, along with the worst pilots get killed."⁵⁶ The squadron does not accept Cassada because he does not act like the perfect wingman on the ground. He drinks tea instead of coffee and does not fit the fighter pilot stereotype. While he is considered promising in the air, unlike the natural pilot, he requires instructors who are actually willing to teach him how to be great. Isbell and Grace and those who work as his *Supernatural Aids* try, but he is opposed by his flight commander, Wickenden, and his Squadron Commander, Maj Dunning. It is those leaders who foster a dangerous situation by putting Cassada in a position of having to prove himself.

Isbell takes the risk in taking off with Cassada on his wing in bad weather to help him in his endeavor, but does not plan on losing his radios and relying on Cassada for the approach. "Isbell's true task was biblical. It was the task of Moses — he would take them to within the sight of what was promised, but no further."⁵⁷ Isbell enables this moment for Cassada to experience greatness but the reader never knows how Cassada handles his last test and what goes through his head. There is no internal dialogue that the reader can analyze and the last moments of his death will be a mystery that cannot be solved. Why didn't he eject? Did he know he was about to crash? Did he willingly accept death? These will remain unanswered questions, but Isbell comes to terms with Cassada's death in accepting that it is part of a bigger picture. Isbell says, "Something was usually ending before the last thing ended" and "They were bound together, all of them...in a great orbit"⁵⁸ Isbell places Cassada on a short list of romantic figures

that have been, and will be, a part of his story. He reasons “It is only in their lives they die. In yours they live to the end.”⁵⁹ Cassada receives the *Boon* of “being known” which in his case can only happen through death. The book is written with a series of flashbacks to Cassada’s end. His death is something that is going to happen, and is painted as his destiny. Cassada strives through darkness, and does not falter in his quest, but ultimately gives himself over to his destiny that is a part of both his journey and the journey of those around him.

Isbell says Cassada’s beauty is that of the martyr and through his martyrdom, the squadron will hopefully change, following the accident investigation. The squadron is so broken, that its members cannot even see it. It is a post-combat unit that is struggling to find its identity in peacetime, and is headed down the wrong path, clinging to an idea and an in-group that is outdated. It takes Cassada’s death to hopefully put the squadron on a healthier path, with better leadership and a desire to teach the next generation of pilots who did fit their image. The reader sees glimpses of Cassada’s journey and can only hope that in the moment of waving to the farm boys he had gotten more out of life than those triple his age. His life and death affected at least Isbell, and potentially others, those who recall his life and death. Cassada’s story can also be the warning to those on their own personal journeys; what a person does and how they treat others matters for good or for bad in the journey of others. As a Christ-like figure, Cassada was likely a hero to Isbell, and the reader anticipates that Isbell’s life is changed for the better. Isbell accepts his own destiny when he says, “In the end you got on a train and went along the river.”⁶⁰

Conclusion

Through looking for elements of Campbell’s monomyth in the lives of King, Cleve, and Cassada, their adjudication as the hero becomes clear, despite the details of their deaths.

Campbell defines a hero as “anyone who gives themselves to something bigger than themselves.”⁶¹ His hero’s journey then applies to the pilots in these works, and to all those warriors who accept the call to serve their countries. This analysis is valuable in evaluating personal journeys and the journeys of others, who have paid the ultimate price for something beyond themselves. Though it is a topic society avoids, every person owes a death and a long life is not guaranteed. Though there will be a meaning attached to death, that is less in an individual’s control than the details of his journey.

Somewhere, a son will kiss his mother or a wife will kiss her spouse and that will be the last moment they see their loved one. Inevitably in the military profession, a warrior will die. Understanding this reality, then the following recommendations from analyzing fictional literature may help to bridge the gap between fact and film. First, there must not be a rank ordering of death, but instead a focus on the details of life. Society should not label a warrior a hero based on how he died, and must understand the heroic act is not isolated to giving one’s physical life, but in the sacrifice of giving a daily life to something bigger than one’s self. In that way, those who serve in the military or in other public-servant roles are qualified as heroes to society long before their last day. Considering as well that heroes are personal and unique to an individual, the entire issue can be eliminated by simply calling those who serve warriors. The warrior ethos is something that is identifiable with military members and further eliminates the controversy of a hero debate. Armed with a new narrative, individuals can look for elements of the monomyth in those warriors’ lives, to discover a completed life, instead of a tragically short life. This does not relieve survivors of their duty to understand how a death occurred, in order to prevent others from a similar fate; in doing so, they may complete perhaps one purpose of the warrior’s death. To those who survive the warrior, it is helpful to look for the hero’s journey

within their own lives and understand that a death is not the end, but a test, if not the greatest test, in their own personal journeys.

In looking at a completed journey of another, our own individual journeys, and of the intersection and interdependency of those journeys, my hope is that like a great novel, the bigger picture will emerge of the journey mankind faces together. It is in this way that our eyes will be opened to the interconnectedness of it all, and though elements of our lives and deaths may always be a mystery, we may catch a glimpse of a beautiful design that is being weaved before us, and will continue to grow, long after we too are gone.



Endnotes

¹ I wish to thank Major Matthew Humphrey for his thoughtful contributions. All errors found within are my own.

² Joseph D. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), xii.

³ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. 3rd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), 5.

⁴ Campbell, 59.

⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁰ Ibid., 125.

¹¹ Ibid., 146.

¹² Ibid., 149.

¹³ Ibid., 167.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170.

¹⁵ Ibid., 188.

¹⁶ Ibid., 196.

¹⁷ Ibid., 205.

¹⁸ Vogler, 2.

¹⁹ *Independence Day*, directed by Roland Emmerich (Los Angeles, CA: Centropolis Entertainment, 1996).

²⁰ *Armageddon*, directed by Michael Bay (Burbank, CA: Touchstone Pictures, 1998).

²¹ *London Has Fallen*, directed by Babak Najafi (Los Angeles, CA: Nu Image, 2016).

²² Congressional Medal of Honor Society, Archive Statistics. 2016. Retrieved from: www.cmohs.org/medal-statistics.php

²³ US Department of Veterans Affairs. Death on Active Duty – Survivor Benefits, Veteran Affairs, 2009.

²⁴ James Salter. *Cassada*. (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 183.

²⁵ Ibid., 185.

²⁶ Ibid., 185.

²⁷ Jack D. Hunter, *The Ace*. (Indianapolis, IN: Blue River Press 2008), 282.

²⁸ Ibid., 299.

²⁹ Ibid., 292.

³⁰ Ibid., 293.

³¹ Salter, *The Hunters*, 233.

³² Campbell, *Hero*.

³³ Hunter, 28.

³⁴ Ibid., 30.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hunter, 181.

- ³⁷ Ibid., 190.
³⁸ Ibid., 236.
³⁹ Ibid., 293.
⁴⁰ Ibid., 110.
⁴¹ Ibid., 185.
⁴² Ibid., 288.
⁴³ Ibid., 291.
⁴⁴ Ibid., 119.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 300.
⁴⁶ James Salter, *The Hunters*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1997, 6.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 7.
⁴⁹ Ibid., 135.
⁵⁰ Ibid., 227.
⁵¹ Ibid.
⁵² Salter, *Cassada*, 227.
⁵³ Ibid., 43.
⁵⁴ Ibid., 81.
⁵⁵ Ibid.
⁵⁶ Salter, *Cassada*, Forward.
⁵⁷ Ibid., 19.
⁵⁸ Ibid., 18.
⁵⁹ Ibid., 207.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 208.
⁶¹ Joseph D. Campbell, and Bill D. Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

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